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Thank you Mr. Chairman for inviting me to testify today.

Since the beginning of the uprising in Syria, Human Rights Watch has made numerous trips to the northern part of the country from across the Turkish border. I was there in December for four days, visiting several towns in the countryside north and east of Aleppo City. Some of my colleagues went to Aleppo in February; we have also conducted research trips in the last year in Idlib and Latakia provinces. The Syrian opposition controls the ground in these areas, and is struggling, with growing but still insufficient international help, to provide for the civilian population. The Syrian government, meanwhile, still controls the skies.

In some superficial ways, the area of opposition-held Syria that I saw – in Aleppo Province – looks normal. The border crossing is straightforward. There are very few checkpoints along the roads. Behind the front lines, one does not see or hear constant, obvious signs of fighting. Our staff have felt secure enough to go in and out, to travel about, and to spend several nights inside at a time – though of course with careful planning and precautions – an important fact when considering whether a larger international humanitarian assistance effort is possible.

But the distress caused by this horrific war is evident, and growing. Though the towns I visited were far from fully safe, they are crowded with internally displaced people who had fled or been driven from areas closer to the

fighting, some of whom have been displaced multiple times. Some were staying with friends and families; others were cared for communally in makeshift camps and facilities; all increased the burden on residents already running out of food and other necessities.

In Assad's Syria, the central government provided many essential services and commodities. At first, perhaps unwilling to admit that it had lost control over large parts of the country, the government continued to allow deliveries of some goods and services to opposition-held territory. By late last year, however, as winter cold was setting in, the government began denying food, fuel and power to these areas. Electricity became intermittent, if it came through at all. Fuel – essential for everything from transportation, to heating homes, to running generators that power hospitals and granaries that grind grain into flour – became in short supply. The shortage of flour, needed to make the bread that is Syria's staple food, was the number one humanitarian concern expressed by virtually every Syrian I met – by ordinary people, by civilian administrators, and even by rebel military commanders.

When I was in Aleppo Province in December, some supplies were coming across the border with Turkey, in what seemed like an ad hoc way. From time to time, local relief committees, established in every town to supervise distribution of humanitarian goods, would find out that someone, often a private individual, had brought a few truckloads of food or medicine or blankets from Turkey, and claim as much as they could; meanwhile, other towns would go without even as their supplies ran out.

It was striking how utterly invisible the international community was in northern Syria, in comparison to many other conflict zones around the world. There was no sign of the United Nations, with its distinctive vehicles and staff. The International Committee for the Red Cross has been able to visit these areas from time to time but has no permanent presence, a problem not just because of its experience in providing aid, but because the ICRC has a unique mandate and capacity to assist and protect prisoners. I spent a few hours interviewing detainees in a rebel-run prison that no other international monitors had visited to that point.

There is a good reason why these and some other organizations were absent: Many were operating from Damascus to provide desperately needed aid to civilians in government-controlled areas of Syria. And the Syrian government had told them that they would be expelled from that part of the country if they crossed the Turkish border – which means that they could get to northern Syria only through a long and dangerous drive

through Syria itself. UN agencies have to respect the sovereignty of a UN member state, unless the United Nations passes a resolution that states otherwise – and thus far Russia has blocked efforts at the UN Security Council to press the Syrian government to allow cross-border aid.

International donors had, in fact, paid for some of the small quantities of aid reaching northern Syria at the time of my visit. But since the origin of the aid was not made obvious to people on the ground, few had any idea where it was coming from. Everywhere I went, people asked: "Where is the international community?" Their anger was directed especially at the United States – perhaps in part because I had told them I was American, but mostly, I think, because they believe that the US as the most powerful country in the world has the capacity to help whomever it chooses to help, and because they assumed that everything the US does or doesn't do is the result of a deliberate, well-thought-out plan. "If America isn't here helping us," many people told me, "that must be because they want Assad to win."

The absence of outside aid also diminished the credibility of Syria's civilian opposition leadership, including the new Syrian Opposition Coalition (SOC). The SOC had just been established, raising hopes that it could mobilize relief from the international community to people inside Syria. I met many people in northern Syria, including those running the local Revolutionary Councils, who told me that they respected the leaders of the SOC, but would have little time for this new body – and certainly little incentive to defer to its authority – until it started delivering what they needed, beginning with food and fuel. Meanwhile, in some rebel-held areas, more extremist elements of the opposition, including Jabhat al Nusra, were gaining support precisely because they were able to distribute humanitarian aid.

As difficult as conditions were in Aleppo Province, our staff found they were even worse in the parts of Idlib and Latakia that they visited late last year– since those areas are less accessible from Turkey. By all accounts, civilians in the far eastern area around Deir el Zour have faced particularly great distress in recent months, and there is reason for concern about the inhabitants of the city of al Raqqa, which had reportedly almost tripled in size due to the influx of displaced persons before falling to the opposition in February.

Mr. Chairman, Human Rights Watch and other organizations that had been on the ground in Syria have reported these concerns to the administration over the last several months, but I can report some good news. The US government has significantly boosted funding for assistance

provided by private relief organizations operating across the Turkish border. When our team visited Aleppo in February, their contacts reported that more aid was arriving and that food shortages had lessened since our previous visit in December. Most people said that they still didn't know who was providing the aid. But at least the aid was getting through. Partly as a result, even in Aleppo City, close to the front lines, our team saw many more civilians, including women and children, back in their homes – some of whom had returned from what they described as the indignity of living in displaced person camps.

But here is the bad news. It is also, I'm afraid, the most important news: While our team was in Aleppo, they noted that many civilians had begun leaving the city again. The reason was not the absence of aid or of electricity or of water, or even the fighting nearby, all of which they could endure. It was because the Syrian government had started launching ballistic missiles, including SCUDs, at Aleppo, weapons capable of leveling entire city blocks at one time. These ballistic missiles cannot be targeted accurately. When fired on cities, they serve one purpose – to terrorize people. The message these strikes deliver to civilians throughout Syria is clear: "This is what will happen to you if you allow the rebels into your towns and neighborhoods."

In many of the opposition-held areas where our teams have conducted investigations, government airstrikes on populated areas had a similar effect over time. This bombardment is not constant. In many towns my colleagues and I visited in December, for example, there had been no airstrikes for several days. But this may have had more to do with the poor weather over northern Syria during that time. On my last day in Aleppo Province, a clear, sunny day, virtually every town we had passed through was hit. During the afternoon, sub-munitions from a cluster bomb (an inherently indiscriminate weapon that the Syrian government has routinely used), struck across the street from the home where we had had breakfast that morning, killing three people.

When aircraft appear in the sky, there is no warning and nowhere to hide. Each day people just wake up and wish for bad weather. Even in the most securely held opposition areas, the threat of air and missile attacks complicates efforts to provide services to the population. Each local council faces dilemmas: Should schools be kept closed, denying children an education, or should they be opened, taking the chance that an airstrike could kill dozens of kids concentrated in one place? Should people be asked to pick up their daily bread at bakeries, as they traditionally have done, even though government forces have repeatedly bombed bakeries as civilians lined up outside? Or should far more

cumbersome door-to-door deliveries of bread to people's homes be organized?

The lack of humanitarian aid is a big problem for ordinary people in Syria, Mr. Chairman. But the underlying problem is the lack of security.

That said, there are some steps that could be taken to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. Human Rights Watch would like to suggest a few.

First, the US and other concerned governments should explore ways to make it possible for UN agencies to provide cross-border assistance to opposition-held areas in a safe and effective manner. It will be hard to provide assistance to opposition-held areas in the quantities needed if UN agencies with the logistical capacity to manage those kinds of operations are not involved. The UN's efforts to provide so-called "cross-line" assistance – from government to rebel-controlled areas – will not suffice. Such convoys must cross dangerous frontline areas, requiring time-consuming negotiations with both government and rebel forces; it makes little sense to spend days and weeks moving supplies in this way to people who in some cases are living just minutes from the Turkish border.

The Syrian authorities have rejected repeated calls to allow the UN to operate cross-border, and likely will continue to do so, as its strategy appears to be to increase, rather than diminish, the distress of people living in areas occupied by the opposition. Russia has not supported action by the Security Council even to ease the humanitarian suffering of civilians in these areas. The US should continue to press for Security Council action. At the same time, it should explore an alternative approach: asking the UN General Assembly, where no country has a veto, to authorize UN agencies to provide cross-border aid.

Second, the US government should increase support for private relief organizations providing cross-border assistance. This support has grown over the last few months, but is still insufficient. The US should also encourage Turkey, which deserves credit for facilitating the assistance provided thus far, to take additional steps needed to increase its volume.

For example, most relief aid now enters Syria at one border crossing, south of the Turkish town of Killis. If Turkey were to upgrade and open other crossings, it would be possible to scale-up assistance, and allow access to more remote areas currently receiving little aid, such as in northeast Syria. It would also be tremendously helpful if Turkey were to allow humanitarian organizations managing cross-border efforts to obtain legal registration and work permits for their staff. This would enable them to obtain bank

accounts and rent property, and make it easier for them to sign larger contracts with Turkish businesses to obtain supplies. Finally, it would be helpful if Turkey took the technical steps necessary to extend the coverage of its cell phone network into Syria, allowing aid workers to communicate more securely deeper inside the country.

Some have asked if assistance provided by the US government through nongovernmental organizations should be labeled as coming from the United States. As I mentioned, many people I met in northern Syria were angry that the international community was not – as far as they could tell – helping them, and would I believe have been happy to see that aid was coming from the United States. But I cannot be certain that all Syrians would be, in a part of Syria where jihadi groups are increasingly active, or that branding aid would pose no security risk to those providing it. The US government, like any other government, ought to be communicating transparently about its aid and telling the Syrian people, through its contacts in the opposition and through the media, that it is providing assistance. But on the question of branding the aid itself, the US should defer to those putting themselves on the line to deliver it.

Others have asked whether humanitarian aid should be provided directly to the Syrian opposition bodies, including the SOC, allowing them to distribute it to the population. We believe it is appropriate for the US to provide direct assistance, including adequately monitored cash grants, to local councils to help them provide basic services to their people -- to maintain water, sewage, electricity and emergency response systems, to restore judicial and police institutions that will respect human rights, and to start rebuilding infrastructure. Such assistance will meet immediate needs, strengthen the credibility of moderate elements in the opposition, and lay the groundwork for post-war reconstruction. But when it comes to pure humanitarian assistance – items like flour and fuel that have to be shipped across the border in large quantities and distributed to people impartially on the basis of need – it is better to rely on organizations that have the experience and logistical capacity on both sides of the border and that will ensure that aid is not politicized.

Let me make one final, and crucial point: The debate about branding aid is happening because donor governments want the Syrian people to know that they are doing something to help. But it is not fair to place on humanitarian organizations the entire burden of proving to Syrians that the United States cares about their plight. The humanitarian organizations are doing their job as best as they can under appalling conditions. To ask them to achieve political ends – whether building good will for the West among Syrians, or strengthening the opposition, or protecting Syrians from

violence – is to transfer to them responsibilities that belong to governments, including the US government. It is a way of absolving governments of their responsibilities.

It is also not going to work. Humanitarian aid is important, but it is only a temporary solution, a band aid, to reduce suffering.

The world faced a very similar set of issues in Bosnia during the 1990s. For three years, as tens of thousands of civilians were killed and driven from their homes, as the city of Sarajevo was besieged by artillery and snipers, the primary response of the international community was to send humanitarian aid. A UN peacekeeping mission was deployed to protect that aid, but not to protect the people receiving it. I was a speechwriter at the State Department at the time, and the talking points I prepared in answer to questions about the killing in Bosnia always began with an account of the tons of assistance the US had provided.

In Bosnia they called it "bread for the dead." People accepted the aid, of course. They needed to eat and to stay warm. But they never felt that the international community was providing meaningful help so long as atrocities being committed against them continued. Food and medicine might keep them alive long enough to be killed by a bullet or tank shell. But it solved nothing.

Humanitarian aid is desperately needed in Syria, Mr. Chairman. We should be providing more of it, to more people. But there is no humanitarian solution to Syria's humanitarian crisis.